

February 20, 2017

Senator Formica, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and the other distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

As members of the Board of Education and as the Superintendent of Schools in Weston, we take great pride in the quality of education provided to our students, the scope of our academic and co-curricular offerings, the success of our students and the level of professional development given to our staff. We also work hard to provide our students and staff with a safe, secure and supportive environment. The school district's ability to continuously improve its offerings, to sustain the excellence of its teaching staff and other personnel, and to maintain its facilities is due largely to the generosity of Weston's taxpayers but also relies on the Federal and State monies it and the Town receive. Although the amount of Federal and State monies is small relative to the overall school budget, we view every dollar as critical to our educational mission.

This environment comes at a price, derived from working with a zero-based budget, making difficult decisions to prioritize "needs" above "wants" and providing the careful scrutiny of each line item by school and town leadership. Despite the volatile economic environment of the past several years, by virtue of this hard work, we have provided a fiscally responsible budget each year. However, the current budget has been put under tremendous stress by mid-year reductions in Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) monies. Now the Governor's proposed budget critically changes the playing field in a fundamentally adverse way.

As we strive to support the education of our children, we cannot stand idly by while the strength of the educational institutions Weston and other Towns have built may be compromised by hitting these districts with the double hammer of reducing or eliminating State aid and burdening them with obligations of the State. We strongly support all students in the State having the opportunity to succeed, but striking at what is working well in this State is not the appropriate answer to the State's economic difficulties.

The actions taken to date on ECS, together with the Governor's proposed budget, threaten to undermine the work our district has done to build an educational environment where 99% of our students go on to colleges of distinction and become contributors to our global society. The proposed ECS formula, while hopefully benefitting larger districts, decimates monies for Weston. On ECS alone, since FY15, Weston has sustained a \$685,133 reduction, and for FY18, the Governor's proposed budget brings the remaining ECS grant of \$263,431 to zero. This reflects almost \$950,000 in reduced funding to Weston since FY15.

The proposed shift to municipalities of a significant proportion of the obligations for the teachers' pension plan will severely impact municipalities like Weston, which, in particular, relies heavily on property taxes. School budgets are driven in large part by teachers' salaries and benefits, which are tethered to negotiations subject to the mandatory arbitration provisions of the Teacher Negotiation Act. Under the Governor's proposal, Weston would assume in FY18 around \$2.35 million in pension obligations from the State. Clearly these pension liabilities were accrued during a time when the State controlled funding policies and contributions. Now the Governor proposes to saddle municipalities with liabilities resulting from decisions into which they had no input. Unless the burden on our taxpayers is increased, a shift in the responsibility for teacher pension obligations of the magnitude proposed by the Governor will ultimately impact the classroom environment. Furthermore, without the ability to negotiate or manage the terms of the pension plan, we are powerless to control the pension costs while being forced to bear the tremendous financial burden. There also is no assurance that the shift in responsibility for pension obligations would stay at the level proposed. With the deficit facing the State, this has the appearance of a slippery slope.

It is also important to note that Weston is one of the few districts to contribute responsibly on a yearly basis to cover its OPEB liabilities, and has always been transparent about its pension obligations.

Finally, the proposed change in the Special Education Excess Cost Grant to a new Special Education Grant that may or may not go directly to the school district and that will be adjusted according to a municipality's relative wealth is expected to result in over a \$400,000 decrease in

monies for Weston for FY18. This again, absent increasing the burden on our taxpayers, can only have a negative impact on the classroom environment for the students that need extra services.

If implemented, the above proposals not only will challenge our ability to continue to provide the optimal level of services for our current students and staff but also, if class sizes or other fundamental aspects of how we deliver education are impacted, may make it difficult to expand our openings for Open Choice students.

These proposed changes could not come at a worse time for municipalities that are going through their budget processes. Local budgets have been built on assumptions that now are in a state of flux and the numbers are not expected to be settled until after citizens have voted. We would all be better served if changes were proposed with sufficient time for municipalities to comment, discuss and prepare for those changes prior to their implementation.

Weston has a very conservative fund balance due to laborious and consistent planning, and for the government to assume that Weston could be “safe” with a fund balance of 5% or 6% is both unwise and financially irresponsible in this day and age. Towns, such as Weston, cannot now pay for the poor planning and policy of the State of Connecticut.

School districts across the State are suffering from diminished State support, escalating costs of doing business and crushing unfunded mandates. Any fiscal realignment must come with mandate relief. The number of unfunded mandates imposed by the State is simply unsustainable without the resources to meet them. If districts are to overcome the budgetary obligations the State assigns to the local level, then control on how those dollars are spent should rest with municipalities. The unified regional calendar is a “shining” example of the State’s interference in a local decision. Pitting the needs of a particular community to deliver its curricula against the mandate of the State to deliver it according to an artificially derived schedule is a flawed and inappropriate approach.

While financing alone does not provide equal educational opportunity, it does set the stage for success. It is for this reason that the Legislature must oppose the above elements of the proposed budget and continue to support excellence in education for all students. It also is imperative for the Legislature to relieve districts of the extensive burden of unfunded mandates.

The Weston Board of Education and Superintendent of Schools urge the members of the Appropriations Committee to reject the Governor's proposals of draconian cuts and transfer of teacher pension obligations to municipalities, which have the potential to adversely impact generations of children to come, and to find other means of addressing the deficit.

Thank you for your service in government.

Respectfully submitted,

Ellen Uzenoff
Chairperson
On behalf of the
Weston Board of Education
Weston, Connecticut

Dr. William McKersie
Superintendent
Weston Public Schools
Weston, Connecticut